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CLASSICAL INDIA

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CLASSICAL INDIA

Edited by

WILLIAM H. McNEILL

and

JEAN W. SEDLAR

New York
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
London 1969 Toronto

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1115
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Library of Congress Catalogue Card Number: 68-8409
Printed in the United States of America

Preface

The greatest obstacle to the historical study of ancient India is the chronological mistiness surrounding the original sources. Most classical Indian texts were shaped and re-shaped through generations of oral recitation. They were transmitted by word of mouth from master to pupil through organized school systems that trained members of the upper classes in their religious and social duties; and they survived because their validity and relevance remained largely unchallenged. Although some literary works—especially those emanating from court circles, like the dramas of Kalidasa—may confidently be ascribed to known authors and reasonably precise dates, this is not the case with most. Those compositions of greatest significance in the evolution of Indian civilization can be dated only by allowing for one or more centuries' possible error; and their authors are either anonymous or of questionable historicity.

The chief examples of literary anonymity and oral editing are the classic religious texts—the four Vedas of the Hindus and the early Buddhist Sutras—and the two great Hindu epics known as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. As the original contents of these works became older and progressively less intelligible, or as religious conceptions changed with time, explanatory passages—which often changed the original meaning—were added. Traditional verses were retained beside newer ones, even when their original function had disappeared; and relatively recent compositions were incorporated into ancient texts and ascribed to the sages of former times. While such editing of traditional materials is by no means unknown in other civilizations, the habit of oral transmission made it especially pronounced in India. The best-known texts were committed to

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writing centuries after they first took form; and their component strata are correspondingly difficult to identify. The annals of kings—which occupy so prominent a place in ancient Near Eastern or Chinese literature—are virtually non-existent in India; politics and warfare were not considered worthy of record. With their dearth of references to historically identifiable persons or events, Indian writings usually provide few clues as to date of composition. Modern philological techniques—which depend on the analysis of language development—are of similarly limited use in unscrambling the chronology of texts so lacking in fixed points of orientation. The most precise dates in Indian history have been established on the evidence of Greek, Chinese, and (at a later period) Muslim and European writers.

In the absence of reliable dating, it becomes tempting to treat the whole of Indian history as a single cultural landscape. But no competent observer regards this as the true state of affairs. History did not stand still south of the Himalayas, even if its development is difficult to trace. Still, Indian literature can more easily be handled systematically than chronologically. For the purpose of this volume we have borrowed a convenient scheme from the ancient Indian sages and classified our texts according to subject-matter under four heads: 1) *artha*, or the practical skills of public and private life; 2) *kama*, or sense-gratification; 3) *dharma*, or law and righteousness; and 4) *moksha*, the means of transcending the common-sense world of things.

The last of these four, *moksha*, is undoubtedly the special hallmark of Indian civilization. It was Indian religion which most impressed European scholars in the early decades of the nineteenth century, once they had ceased to marvel at the discovery that Sanskrit is etymologically related to most of the languages of Europe. Other aspects of Indian culture proved less appealing to Europeans, or even—like the sensuousness of much Indian art—positively offensive to their sensibilities. Indians themselves tended to emphasize the spirituality of their cultural inheritance in contrast to the materialism of the West. In this way they explained why India had fallen so far behind

Europe and America in wealth and power: its aims had simply been different. Modern Indians could claim superiority of spiritual insight much as Westerners took pride in their material and technical accomplishments. The upshot was to give foreigners a rather one-sided picture of India which tended to ignore the non-religious aspects of its cultural heritage.

Because the Indian thought-world is so different from our own, its accomplishments must necessarily be approached with care. The first requirement is to ascertain what the basic texts actually meant to those who wrote and used them. This is by no means simple; and variations of interpretation and style among available translations compound the problem. We must then ask how the divergent aspects of Indian tradition fit together to make a distinctive civilization having a style of its own. This of course begs the question: conceivably there is no link at all between the amorality of the *Arthashastra* and the ethical prescriptions of the *Laws of Manu*, or between the open sensuality of the *Kama Sutra* and the bodily asceticism enjoined by the *Yoga Sutra* or the Buddhist monastic vows. Because these various works are the products of different periods and regions of India, perhaps no all-inclusive pattern or harmonizing of apparent contradictions can be expected. On the other hand, Indian thinkers themselves believed that the divergencies within their moral and speculative tradition reflected a divinely ordained separation of human activities according to age and social class. And contemporary psychology may at least suggest that such opposites as sexual indulgence and ascetic discipline are capable of complementing and even sustaining one another.

In previous volumes of this series, we have characterized ancient Near Eastern civilization by two key concepts: bureaucratic empire and monotheism; and Hellenic civilization by the institution of the polis and the idea of natural law. In similarly oversimplified fashion, the principal components of Indian civilization might be given as caste—the organization of society into rigid, hereditary social classes—and a transcendental religiosity pervading every sphere of life. The two were closely associated in theory: for the religious idea of *karma* (roughly:

“sin”) was supposed to explain everyone’s present and future social status. But while the significance of religion and social class in ancient India can scarcely be denied, the degree of their importance may well be questioned; and the theory can best be tested against the original sources. The juxtaposition in this volume of texts of *artha* and *kama* as well as of *dharma* and *moksha* will let the reader judge for himself as to the actual inter-relatedness and respective influence of the various elements of ancient Indian civilization.

Chicago, Illinois
June 1969

W. H. M.

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